

**The significant loose ends of systemic leadership? A personal story of complexity, systems thinking, OR, innovation and the scope for public policy learning**

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ABSTRACT

Following three decades of working in local government, I recently completed a Systems Science PhD at the University of Hull that explored the subject of leadership to address complexity in local governance networks. This presentation is *not* about my doctoral research, although I'm pleased to have separate conversations about that. As my research encompassed a variety of approaches drawn from complexity, systems thinking and OR my presentation is just about some loose ends I've picked up along the way. They are tacit, nuanced, *always* tantalising and could amount to something if forces were galvanised. So for today, I've identified seven loose ends which could signify an opportunity to help build capacity to lead networks of people to learn together systemically in pursuit of an aim of designing 'services to the public' collaboratively and tailored to the locality, rather than the design of silo-based public services – a crucial distinction. This fundamental transition needs to be managed. In no particular order, these loose ends include:

- research hats, are they different?
- systems thinking: an empty phrase
- supply/demand dysfunction: a continuing frustration
- the making of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century public servant
- rooting innovation
- an OECD viewpoint and
- the contemporary value of soft science.

Could this be a timely opportunity to help foster a sophisticated form of adaptive, learning leadership in local governance? Research which fosters reticulist skills would let a good way develop and evolve between academia and practice, for those who are willing. Despite essential differences between specialisms, it's sensible also to identify commonalities and agree what should be paid attention to. What matters?

Building human capacity to develop a *working practice of systemic leadership* demands that *facilitative* complexity, systems thinking and operational research approaches could be joining forces to address this crucial arena of public policy.

## INTRODUCTION

Thank you for coming, especially at this time of day! Firstly, I'll give you a potted history of my background, and then I'll move on to the loose ends.

My background is in psychology and, following work in academic research, I worked for three decades in local government, largely in accident investigation, road safety and transport planning, undertaking a Masters in Local Governance at the Institute of Local Government Studies along the way, with a dissertation about system recovery as an alternative to system failure. I recently completed a Systems Science PhD at Hull about addressing complexity in local governance networks.

This presentation is *not* about my doctoral research.

I'm speaking to you today largely as a curious practitioner. I believe there's a lot of unfinished business. These loose ends are tacit, nuanced, *always* tantalising and could amount to something if forces were galvanised.

So for today, I've identified seven loose ends which *could* signify an opportunity to help build capacity to lead networks of people to learn together systemically in pursuit of an aim of designing 'services to the public' collaboratively and tailored to the locality, rather than the design of silo-based public services – a crucial distinction. This is a fundamental transition which needs to be orchestrated.

In no particular order, I'll take you on a guided tour of the seven loose ends.

## Number one - research hats, are they so different?

In doing my research, I worked with people from a complexity background, systems thinking and operational research.

Although there seems to be a habit of clearly explaining why one fits into one of those groups rather than another – even to the extent of what I could call ‘rubbishing the opposition,’ these people weren’t so very different in their approach after all. Also, they are all concerned with addressing society’s ‘wicked’ problems. Making these distinctions in research specialisms is a crucial way of survival in research and practice.

But I think a crucial distinction to be made is between the contributions of hard and soft science, and both together – more of that later.

What I see potential for is for the ‘soft’ elements drawn from complexity, systems thinking and operational research to group together and find their similarities, *as well as* defining distinctions and differences.

A good example to help achieve this is Gabriele Bammer’s Integration and Implementation Sciences, or I2S movement. This worthy endeavour seeks, amongst other things, to improve research impact in addressing complex real-world problems through enhancing knowledge synthesis.

**This is a loose end of a variety of research hats finding common ground to work together to address real-world complexities...**

## Number two - systems thinking: an empty phrase

The phrase 'systems thinking' has many interpretations. In the local government sphere, I have found its understanding (if there at all) to be synonymous with 'lean' and there is very little wider understanding of systems thinking and Systems Science in all its variety and richness of human endeavour in philosophy, methodology and practice. In common parlance, it gets mixed up with Information Systems and the definition of a system as a noun or a thing. People even refer to 'whole systems thinking,' which to my mind is an impossibility.

My own messy discovery of systems thinking went something like this - lean, then (thank goodness) I found soft systems thinking, then general systems theory, complexity, system dynamics – so how do you choose? – then (hoorah!) Creative Holism - but what if conditions are always complex and co-ercive? Then tantalisingly, Critical Systems Heuristics.....there was clearly yet much more to discover, so next up, Hull and something called Critical Systems Thinking, pluralism, Boundary Critique, Problem Structuring, Viable System Model, and so on... Not to mention readings of Aristotle, Bateson, Capra, Elias, Meadows and many more... the absolute power of systems thinking grows before your very eyes, while the restrictive nature of the normal ways of thinking (or not thinking) and working become more and more apparent.

So to me, systems thinking would more usefully be called 'systemic thinking,' defined as a multidisciplinary body of human endeavour that is typified by a *willingness* to consider connectivity in time and space, both individually and collectively. It's a way of thinking that combines synthesis and analysis. It permits deliberation *as well as* deduction and calculation.

The phrase 'systems thinking' has been hollowed out. It has become an empty phrase and a counter-movement surely needs to protest loudly against this form of superficiality.

**This is a loose end of enriching the empty phrase of systems thinking.**

### Number three - supply/demand dysfunction: a continuing frustration

Here, I'm thinking of 'supply' as the academic and consultancy expertise to help provide the capacity to address complex challenges within a wide enough remit and with a variety of approaches. Much of this expertise lies within the UK and indeed much of it has its origins in the UK.

I'm thinking of 'demand' as the way in which it is becoming apparent that more fundamental ways are needed to tackle the challenges of local governance, in which the austerity agenda has moved from a challenge of 'doing more with less', through 'doing the same with less,' to 'doing things fundamentally differently.'

I believe that a seismic shift is to be made is from a *service-led model* of local government to a *systemic-deliberative model*, with the role of service design for the public good following on from that form of deliberation. In turn, this demands a shift from a routine assumption of mechanistic thinking to an adaptive act of systemic learning.

There is scope for improved connectivity between supply (academia) and demand (local government); a point also made in 2014 following the Local Government Navigator Project, which sought to develop closer links between UK research communities and the local government sector:

*"Our conclusion is that the current 'market' for research is dysfunctional. The 'consumer' (local government) does need reliable and robust knowledge and evidence. Existing research outputs and expertise could help to provide this but the consumer is unaware of the 'products' (research output) and services (research expertise) on offer."*  
(Allen et al., 2014, pg. 17).

So, public and other research funds could be joining forces close to home in order to address a significant challenge of effective public policy design at the local level.

**This is a loose end of overcoming the supply/demand dysfunction between research and practice in local government.**

## Number four - the making of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century public servant

The University of Birmingham has been exploring changing roles in local public service, and how support can be provided to develop the skills and competencies to be effective as public, private and third sector roles evolve at the local level. In particular, they've been looking at the making of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century public servant (Needham & Mangan, 2014). Networked authority rooted in the community is seen to be taking over from hierarchical power.

The research defined the characteristics of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century public servant as someone who:

- Is a municipal entrepreneur
- Engages with citizens
- Has generic skills as well as technical expertise
- Builds a fluid career
- Combines an ethos of publicness with commerciality
- Is *rethinking* public services to survive perma-austerity
- Needs fluid and supportive organisations rather than ones which are silo-ed and controlling
- Rejects heroic leadership in favour of distributed and collaborative models of leading
- Is rooted in a locality with a sense of loyalty and identity
- Reflects on practice and learns from that of others.

They ask – are systems-based approaches being considered as an alternative to repeated cycles of organisational restructuring? Are honest conversations going on about what the organisation can and can't do in an era of austerity? What is being done to develop leadership at *all levels* of the organisation?

How can people be supported into this broader range of roles? Surely this could be a direct pitch to complexity, systems thinking, problem structuring and operational research approaches – it's *exactly* what they do.

**This is a loose end of building the capabilities for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century public servant.**

## Number five - rooting innovation

In the public sector, innovation is a hot topic – things have to change somehow, there have been change projects, many of them structural or linked with digital services as the source of the change, then a broader idea of transformational programmes and now, innovation. Innovation has tussled with bureaucracy; public innovation labs have sprung up all over. But experiments need results, normally quite quickly, and an obsession with quick wins can disadvantage longer-term, more substantial initiatives. They can become prey to identifying topics and reporting success quickly, they want and need to succeed. Yet learning from failure is a substantial part of improvement and success.

Approaches to help people innovate, identify problem areas and evaluate more thoughtfully include both design thinking and systems thinking. The Systemic Design Research Network is exploring links between design thinking and systems thinking, both of which seek to enable deliberation within an ‘upstream’ position: an endeavour very relevant to local governance networks.

As Gerald Midgley and Erik Lindhult have pointed out (Midgley & Lindhult, 2017), systems thinking could enhance all concepts of systemic innovation, while Graham Leicester of the International Futures Forum speaks of transformative innovation (Leicester, 2016) – this is at a beginning point and there is much to be explored in applying this thinking to public sector challenges.

This year, Angela Hanson, an innovation specialist and design lead at OECD, has made it clear that she’s wanting to move beyond an ‘innovation toolkit’ (Hanson, 2018). She believes that toolkits have been important, but not sufficient, and that more needs to be done to help define the problem space. How do tools relate to *human skills and expertise*? In Angela’s words – “innovators need access to master craftsperson knowledge: an accessible way to find out what’s possible, navigate what’s available, match tools with the context and the available skills and capabilities, and get advice and support.”

**This is a loose end of the call to root innovation upstream.**

## Number six - an OECD viewpoint

A recent initiative of the OECD was to research how systems approaches to public sector challenges can help work with change (Observatory of Public Sector Innovation, 2017). This was a comprehensive report with case studies, and an overall sense of optimism and challenge.

But I do want to be stark about this: it's very easy to despair and I quote directly from OECD's Annex 2 which is a brief history of systems approaches.

*"Some authors have concluded that without intensive training in systems methodologies success will be unlikely. Thus, systems approaches have remained rather rigid when it comes to practice and it is not surprising that systems thinking has not come to the fore in many domains, especially the public policy and management communities."*

OECD's conclusion is this:

*"...we specifically align ourselves with the recent developments towards methodological pluralism and problem-based approaches to systems thinking and design. Hence, we call on policy practitioners to avoid the paradigm trap of rigid utilization and encourage them to synthesize different approaches."*

In terms of OR's distinguished history in adapting to changing circumstance and opportunities, and the fact that many approaches referred to have their origins in the UK, there is perhaps scope for the OR Society to rise to this challenge?

**This is a loose end of rising to the OECD challenge of synthesizing different approaches in the spirit of methodological pluralism in order to address public sector challenges.**

## Number seven - the contemporary value of soft science

There are many good people whose work has, in one way or another, proclaimed the role and value of soft OR for social development – this approach would certainly have had relevance in my working life which combined working with data and analysis, with the sense-making of working with people.

There are many examples of these people – to name but a few:

Neil Jessop IoR

Pat Rivett

Jonathan Rosenhead

Peter Checkland

Fran Ackermann

Richard Ormerod

Apparently, the ‘soft side’ of OR has distinguished itself in the UK in contrast with the form of Operations Research over the pond. Of course, OR has to be opportunistic and play to the market, but what I’m suggesting is that there *is* an emergent market for its application to public policy design in the contemporary world. Its two-pronged nature of hard and soft could be celebrated and promoted as a very powerful conjoined approach. With the continuing clear strength of attraction of big data and analytics to OR, how does the softer form of behavioural science continue to retain its core identity within OR?

I’m new to OR, just since the tail end of 2013 when I read about the ‘The Future Influence of OR on Public Policy’ initiative and that was of direct interest to my doctoral research. So, I’m no OR expert; I put these questions to an expert audience.

What siren sounds must soft OR make to exert an attraction to find the right people to make this opportunity work with vigour?

**This is a loose end of recognising the continuing value of soft science.**

## SUMMARY & CONCLUSION

### Summary

I've outlined seven significant loose ends which indicate a potential to create a learning programme for a more adaptive, systemic form of leadership.

To recap, these are:

**a variety of research hats finding common ground to work together to address real-world complexities...**

**enriching the empty phrase of systems thinking**

**overcoming the supply/demand dysfunction between research and practice in local government**

**helping to build the capabilities for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century public servant**

**rooting innovation upstream**

**rising to the OECD challenge of synthesizing different approaches in the spirit of methodological pluralism in order to address public sector challenges**

**recognising the continuing value of soft science**

The need to develop human capacity to enact a *working practice of systemic leadership* suggests that *facilitative* complexity, systems thinking and operational research approaches could be joining forces to address this crucial arena of public policy. This is of course a messy problem.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, Russell Ackoff distinguished between three ways of addressing problems – resolving, solving and dissolving.

The idea of *resolving* temporarily for a 'good enough' outcome, consisting of reactive planning for **survival**, he considered to be the tactic of most managers, using clinicians as an example. This requires experience and judgement.

The idea of *solving* for an optimal outcome, consisting of preactive planning for thrival rather than survival, or **growth** seekers, he considered Management Scientists as an example. This requires experiment and science through research.

The idea of *dissolving* for problem removal through idealisation and realisation by interactive planning for **development**, he thought to be the remit of a minority of managers and Management Scientists. This requires synthesis of all approaches through redesign and is the realm of designers.

So, like clinicians through experience and judgement, do we want to *resolve* for survival through reactive planning?

Or, as researchers through experiment and science, *solve* for thrival and growth through preactive planning?

Or, in a designerly fashion through redesign, *dissolve* problems through interactive planning and synthesis for development? i.e. through experience and judgement, experiment and science through research *and* the creativity of redesign, identifying our own self-imposed constraints?

Could this be a timely opportunity to help foster a sophisticated form of adaptive, learning leadership in local governance? Research which fosters reticulist skills would let a good way develop and evolve between academia and practice. Despite differences between specialisms, it's also sensible to identify commonalities and agree what should be paid attention to, in a designerly fashion.

If I could emphasise one thing, it's the need for a transition from a service-led model of local government to a systemic-deliberative form of local governance. That carries quite a lot of ambition.

I'd like to finish with a quote from Ackoff:

“The solution/to a mess/depends/on how/the solutions/to the parts/interact.”

(Ackoff, 1981, pg. 52)

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